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Careful or lenient: welfare reform for lone mothers in the Netherlands

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Summary

The 1996 welfare reform that attempted to get lone parents out of social assistance represents a major shift in social policy in the Netherlands. Instead of having the financial right to care for their children, lone mothers are now obliged to earn their living by paid work as soon as their youngest child reaches the age of five. This policy shift is accompanied by additional incentives to support lone mothers in engaging in (part-time) work. Nevertheless, the measure has met considerable resistance among lone mothers as well as the caseworkers and municipalities that have been granted discretionary powers to implement the new law. Several years after its introduction, it can be concluded that the law has not been very successful; only slightly more than one out of ten lone mothers have actually left social assistance. In this article, we explain these meagre results by analysing the assumptions and incentives of the national policies, and by describing the mechanisms of discretion at a local level.

Résumé

La réforme sociale de 1996 dont l'objectif est de sortir le parent isolé de l'assistance sociale constitue un tournant essentiel dans la politique sociale des Pays-Bas. Au lieu de disposer d'un droit à s'occuper de leurs enfants, les

mères célibataires sont maintenant obligées de gagner leur vie par un travail rémunéré aussitôt que leur plus jeune enfant atteint l'âge de 5 ans. Ce tournant politique s'accompagne par des mesures financières de soutien pour les mères célibataires qui travaillent (à temps partiel). Cependant, ces dispositions ont rencontré une considérable résistance parmi celles-ci ainsi que parmi les travailleurs sociaux et les municipalités qui avaient reçu des pouvoirs discrétionnaires pour mettre en œuvre cette nouvelle loi. Plusieurs années après son introduction, nous pouvons conclure que cette loi n'a pas eu le succès escompté, un peu plus d'un dixième des mères célibataires ont quitté l'assistance sociale. Nous expliquons dans cet article ces maigres résultats en analysant les hypothèses sous-jacentes et les avantages financiers des politiques nationales et en décrivant les mécanismes discrétionnaires au plan local.

The Netherlands: a deviant case

Wherever changes in policy concerning lone mothers took place in the 1990s, it was an attempt to get lone mothers out of their homes and into the labour market in order to earn their own living by paid work. The justifications for these changing policies as well as the character of the incentives are rather diverse. While in the USA a moral stigmatization of lone mothers – accompanied by a racial discourse – goes hand in hand with punitive employment policies, in the UK a moral stigmatization is associated with a more supportive working policy which offers encouragement. In contrast, countries like Denmark, Sweden and Finland lack any moral

Key words

employment policy, gender assumptions, local discretion, lone motherhood, welfare reform

stigmatization of lone mothers but nevertheless stress the importance of paid work. These countries introduced all kinds of care and financial support for lone mothers as early as the 1980s (Hobson, 1994; Lewis, 1997; Millar, 1996; Orloff, 1999). The Netherlands deviates from other countries in several aspects. The Dutch welfare reform of 1996 that required lone mothers to find work was not inspired by a moral stigmatization of lone motherhood. In the process of developing the welfare reform, the lifestyle of the largest social category that was affected by its consequences (65 percent of welfare beneficiaries at that time were lone mothers) was not contested. Apart from some debates in parliament about cohabitation fraud and the issue of how old the children should be when a mother could be expected to earn her own living, hardly any attention was paid to either the assumptions or the implications of the new law for lone mothers (Knijn, 1994; Bussemaker et al., 1997). The Dutch case also deviates from other countries because, on the face of it, there was no reason for changing the law relating to the position of lone mothers. In contrast to, for instance, the USA and UK, the percentage of single parent families has not increased since the 1970s. In addition, and unlike the USA and the Scandinavian countries, single mothers in the Netherlands are almost as much in employment as those with partners (respectively 42 percent and 45 percent). If employed, lone mothers work even more hours a week than mothers with partners do (Niphuis-Nell, 1997). Finally, the Dutch situation deviates from the Scandinavian ones because the Netherlands lacks an infrastructure of care that can support working lone mothers. There are long waiting lists for child-care centres as well as after-school provisions. In this respect, the Netherlands resembles the USA and UK. But while this was the reason for the British government not to require lone parents to become employed until their children reached the age of 16, the Dutch social/democratic/liberal coalition requires lone parents to find

work when their youngest child reaches the age of 5 (Millar and Rowlingson, 2001).

Welfare reform in the Netherlands was aimed at getting lone mothers off welfare in order to free them from poverty and social isolation, and to liberate them from their status as housewives for emancipation reasons. In addition, this reform was intended to result in a reduction of social security budgets. Finding steady work was perceived to be the major means to reach these goals. Until now (four years after the reform's introduction), few successes have been achieved. In the following, we will explain these poor results. Three aspects will be stressed: first, the diffuse character of national social policy; second, the characteristics of lone mothers on welfare; third, administrative reluctance to implement national policies. An underlying argument relates to the gender assumptions of this reform. How are rights and obligations redefined and how are Dutch lone mothers assumed to fulfil these new rights and obligations? We will see if these assumptions concur with the attitudes and practices of lone mothers and, if not, what category of lone mothers do not share these assumptions or are unable to meet the demands. In this part of the article, we will include income packages¹ of different groups of lone mothers. Finally, we will analyse the cultural norms of local policymakers and caseworkers who have to mediate between the national policies and lone mothers on welfare, to see how they contribute to the welfare reform. The article is based upon two studies among lone parents in the Netherlands.² The first study, conducted in 1998, includes a survey of 1,049 Dutch lone mothers on welfare, and interviews with 50 local policymakers and caseworkers in five cities. The second study comprised a follow-up survey of 452 of the respondents of the first study and a survey of 688 lone parents not on welfare (Knijn and Van Wel, 1999; Van Wel and Knijn, 2000). This second study provides an explanation of why lone mothers did or did not come off welfare and also a comparison of the characteristics and motives of

lone mothers on welfare with those of lone parents who earn a living in paid employment.³

Financial and moral rationalities

Current welfare reforms are intended to work on more than one level; by increasing lone mothers' employment rates, reductions in social security expenditure as well as reductions in the poverty of lone-mother families could be realized. After describing several studies on the relationship between poverty among lone mothers and social policies in different countries, Millar (1996) states that some factors that influence the outcome for lone mothers are becoming clearer. She mentions, among others, the basis for entitlements (as a worker, mother or wife); the universal or means-tested basis of entitlements; the rights to services; and the character of family dependencies and support. There is no doubt that welfare regimes matter in poverty rates of lone-mother families; these rates are much higher in the so-called residual welfare states such as the USA than in the so-called social-democratic welfare states such as Denmark and Sweden (Mitchell, 1993; Hobson, 1994). But it is acknowledged that aside from these two extremes, very complex configurations of policies and practices are responsible for the position of lone mothers. Firstly, because social policies operate in quite different social contexts. What might be helpful in one country can be counterproductive in another, and vice versa, and the same outcome may be the result of very contrasting social policies. In Lewis's book, *Lone Mothers in European Welfare Regimes* (1997), case-studies in Italy and Denmark showed that poverty rates in both countries are at a similar low level, a conclusion confirmed by a regression analysis of LIS data made by Plantenga (1999). The employment rates of lone mothers in both countries are also comparable (Bimbi, 1997; Siim, 1997). These outcomes nevertheless

result from completely different social policies and can only be understood in the context of very different social practices. In Italy, the majority of lone mothers are widows supported by small pensions and by the fact that their family takes care of the children. In Denmark, in contrast, the majority of lone mothers are separated or divorced, and are supported by special allowances for lone-parent families and good-quality public child care. Both kinds of support result in higher and often full-time employment for lone mothers, and in better levels of income than in many other countries. By implication, lone mothers in Denmark depend on the combination of work and state support, while in Italy lone mothers depend on the combination of work and family support.

Establishing the consequences of social policy towards lone mothers therefore requires knowledge about the specific character of the welfare regime and the relationships between the state, family and market. It also requires the outcome to be well defined. As the cases of Denmark and Italy show, the outcome may be very different when one looks at poverty and employment rates rather than defining the rates of dependency on the family. In identifying the relationship between poverty among lone mothers and social policies, Lewis (1997) states that lone mothers do best in countries where they both work and receive state benefits, or where the government is generous in supporting all mothers to stay at home. She warns, however, that the latter does not always result in decent incomes. Indeed, social assistance programmes are rather vulnerable to economic pressure and cut-backs in social benefits because they are not formulated as citizenship rights. The case of Ireland and currently also the Netherlands (Plantenga, 1999) show that when the exclusion of lone mothers from the labour market is accompanied by cuts in benefits, lone mothers can easily become impoverished. This is also in accordance with what Orloff says about the risks of discretionary social assistance which is not based upon citi-

zanship rights. Coming from a residual welfare state like the USA, she stresses that 'Such aid, while preventing utter destitution, is less effective as a counterweight to dominant social forces in markets and families, than are the programs that take the form of social rights' (Orloff, 1999).

Current welfare reforms concerning lone parents include a limitation of the right to social assistance. Access is limited by reducing the duration of welfare, by demanding participation in training programmes or by introducing the obligation to find a job when the children have reached a certain age. However, new rights have been introduced, such as the right to tax reduction for working single parents, the right to claim additional education and the right to child-care support (Millar, 1996; Orloff, 1999). In fact, most welfare reforms concerning single mothers imply a transformation from rights based upon caring motherhood to rights based upon employed motherhood. These new social rights based upon employed motherhood assume that lone mothers prefer work and income above caring for their children, or feel obliged to accept work because of welfare pressure. Duncan and Edwards comment on these assumptions in many social policy studies by stating that:

The model of the rational economic man also underpins much research in the social policy tradition. One example is the influential body of work advocating an expansion of day care to allow lone (and other) mothers to take up paid work. Here cost-benefit analyses are employed to estimate the financial results for both state expenditure and lone mothers' incomes (1996: 118).

The rational economic assumptions underlying many social policy studies do indeed suppose that either a punitive regime (sanctions and exclusion) or a supportive regime (offering child care and tax reductions) will respectively enforce or stimulate lone mothers

to find work and to earn their own living. Instead, Duncan and Edwards suggest that lone mothers' individual economic calculations need to be placed in the framework of gendered moral rationalities that are constructed, negotiated and sustained socially in particular contexts (1996: 121). This implies that gender aspects do not only operate on the level of social policy constructing (new) gender identities of, in this case, lone mothers, as is suggested by many social policy scholars, but also constitute lone mothers' reaction to social policies. Despite the fact that Duncan and Edwards use a rather diffuse concept (gendered moral rationalities), their claim for including lone mothers as actors in dealing with social policy is very valuable. Also their plea for taking varying cultural norms and attitudes of lone mothers into account makes sense, in particular when one could expect a lot of variation in practices and attitudes among different (sub) groups of lone mothers. Finally, comparing the gender assumptions of lone mothers themselves with those of national and local policymakers might provide a good basis for detecting the discrepancies between social policy and lone mothers' assumptions.

Lone mothers as a social problem

Welfare reform in the Netherlands has been the subject of debate since the end of the 1980s, which finally led to a parliamentary decision in 1994. On 1 January 1996, the new General Social Assistance Act (*nABW: nieuwe Algemene Bijstandswet*) came into practice which stated that lone mothers are obliged to seek work in order to earn their own income once their youngest child reaches the age of 5. The new act also gave discretion to the local level, implying that local welfare offices had to develop their own instruments to implement the law. Since its introduction in 1965 social assistance has covered all people who are unable to earn their own living and are not

entitled to work-related unemployment benefit because they do not meet its criteria. Apart from lone mothers, social assistance covers claimants who have too short or irregular a work history, such as unemployed youngsters leaving school, artists and addicts. That lone mothers constituted more than 60 percent of the social assistance beneficiaries was the result of an unintentional social practice to exclude single mothers from the work obligation, which has been in place since the 1970s and was sanctioned in the 1980s. From this time, single mothers have been entitled to benefits on the basis of the so-called *ABW-sec* clause (Social Assistance-sec), implying that they receive a means-tested benefit of about 70 percent of the minimum wage level till their children reach the age of 16 (Knijn, 1994; Bussemaker et al., 1997).

The first political debates about welfare reform did not, however, initially focus on lone mothers. On the contrary, when the first proposals to change the social assistance law were discussed in 1989, they concerned the simplification and decentralization of the so-called re-activation of welfare recipients. It was suggested that the lower level discretionary bodies – that is, the municipalities, and their welfare and employment offices – should be able to provide better support to individuals returning to the labour market. Lone mothers entered the picture due to the suggestion in a research report that cohabitation fraud was widespread (*Onderzoekscommissie ABW*, research committee *ABW* 1993). Although the extent of such fraud was never confirmed, the arguments appeared reasonable: the social assistance means-test meant it was tempting for lone mothers on welfare not to inform their caseworker that they were living together with a partner who was earning. This report resulted in considerable uproar and political and public debate about individual lone mothers' right to privacy and autonomy versus moral obligations and solidarity, with the latter's underlying implication of not abusing collective means. Instead of discussing the individual

right to social assistance, politicians were eager to change the 'protected' status of lone mothers, who, under the new law, have to prove that they live without an adult partner.

During the process in which the new social assistance law was created, the decentralization of responsibilities to a local level, the activation principle and the extension of the work obligation to larger groups of beneficiaries proved, indeed, to be the main principles (see also Finn, 2000). Some parliamentary debates focussed on lone mothers, in particular on the question of how old the children should be when a mother was supposed to earn her own living. At first, it was suggested that mothers with children below the age of 12 should be exempted. Ter Veld, the Parliamentary under-secretary of social affairs, stated as early as 1992:

The age of 12 years for the youngest child is included in the law, albeit not as an absolute criterion but as a guideline for local authorities who are given the discretion, in case a mother has to take care of one or more children below the age of twelve years, to adjust the work obligation accordingly so that the responsibilities concerning the care for and education of the children can be fulfilled. (TK, 1992–1993: 83)

However, this age indication is not present in the laws proposed in the subsequent years and it is not included in the final text of the law the government addressed to parliament, which included every lone mother, regardless of the age of the children. On the initiative of one of the very small orthodox Christian parties (the Calvinist Political Bond, *GPV*) parliament finally decided that such a loose end in the law was not acceptable. It decided to introduce the work obligation only for lone mothers with children of school age, that is, children of 5 years and above (Weuring, 1996). The welfare reform came into effect on 1 January 1996. Although parliament had tied up one loose end by accepting the age

Table 1 Historical changes in lone-parent families in the Netherlands

	1981	1985	1989	1993	1997
As percent of all families					
with dependent children	8	10	11	10	12
Proportion of whom:					
Widowed	27	16	9	8	3
Divorced	54	58	60	63	52.8
Separated	8	9	7	5	21.7
Never-married	10	17	23	24	22.5

Sources: Figures for 1981 to 1993 are based upon WBO (SCP-Processing). Figures for 1997 from the *Jaarboek Emancipatie* (1999) and based upon CBS Huishoudensstatistiek (1997). The sub-categories for 1997 come from the survey 'Caring for Work' (Van Wel and Knijn, 2000).

indication of the youngest child, many other aspects of the law were still open for interpretation. Although the law says, 'the new rules are in principle applicable to all welfare claimants', it also states that:

municipalities will have to consider the presence of young children. This will enable municipalities to adjust the re-entry into the labour market according to the individual possibilities of those involved. It is women in particular, the main category of claimants of the ABW-sec, who might benefit from this new law. The current welfare regime too often results in an automatic denial of their work potential if they are not required to work. A needless dependence on welfare is ultimately not in the interest of these claimants. (TK, 1993–1994: 23)

Paradoxically, this reform has been a major turning point in the assumptions regarding motherhood in the Netherlands. It was, however, not inspired by an increase in the proportion of lone mothers, since, for decades, about 10 percent of all families with children below the age of 18 have been lone-parent families. Nor was it based upon a moral taboo on lone motherhood as such, which is regarded as just another type of family by the majority of the Dutch population (Van den Avort et al., 1996). Until the shift in the social assistance law, it was assumed that lone mothers cared for their children full time just as most mothers with

partners do; about 40 percent of both categories of mothers are employed, although partnered mothers work fewer hours per week than lone mothers do. Why has the Dutch parliament accepted without adequate debate such a dramatic shift in national policy that goes against the 'gendered moral rationality' of stay-at-home motherhood and concerns a rather vulnerable and politically and publicly uncontested category of mothers?

A process that paved the way for this reform was the changing composition of the category of lone mothers (see Table 1). Although the rates of lone-parent families have not increased at all in the Netherlands since the 1970s, their composition has changed dramatically.

From a group that mainly consisted of widows in the early 1970s, it developed into one that mainly consisted of divorced (63 percent) and unmarried (24 percent) mothers in the early 1990s. The number of lone mothers (not widows because they receive widows' pensions) claiming social assistance therefore increased from 60,000 in 1978 to 103,000 in 1991 (Niphuis-Nell, 1997). Their poverty rates also increased since in the early 1980s welfare benefits were not linked to average wage growth. In the early 1990s, it was recognized that lone parents, and in particular lone mothers, are especially vulnerable to long-term poverty; in 1997 27 percent of mother-headed lone-parent families were in long-term poverty, while 18 percent of single women (mainly elderly) and 3 percent of

two-parent families were in long-term poverty (De Vries, 1999). The definition of lone mothers as a group at risk of poverty which would have severe consequences for their children's well-being contributed to the idea of lone mothers as a social problem (Engbersen and Van der Veen, 1987; Van Gelder, 1987). At that time, however, such a definition did not result in an improvement of welfare benefits. This had been passed over for two other reasons: the official equal opportunities policy and the tendency to 're-activate' people on welfare for budgetary reasons.

Feminist concepts that were incorporated into the framework of the Council for Equal Opportunities⁴ (that has pleaded against Dutch women's economic dependency since the 1980s) also contributed to the new welfare policy. Although the Council has always considered the care of children, its main concern was women's independence of male incomes through the individualization of taxation, social security and paid work. In 1984, the Dutch government recognized many of the Equal Opportunity Council's claims. In a white paper entitled 'Equal Opportunities' it stated:

The Government accepts that all citizens are responsible for their own personal lives and it will contribute to create social conditions to make individual choices possible. This implies that, in the context of economic independence, the consequences of partnerships, for instance marriage, and the choice to have children, also fall under the individual's responsibility for work and income. It is, however, no longer assumed that the implications of parenthood for women, in contrast to those for men, are to care and do the housekeeping all and every day throughout their entire lives. In the light of equal opportunities, raising children has to be combined with paid work by men and women on an equal basis. (TK, 1984–1985: 11)

This text, formulated in the context of what is

still a very strong bread winner regime, is aimed at removing the barriers to women's entry into the labour market (to create the social conditions which will make individual choice possible). It states that individuals have their own responsibility for their personal lifestyles (including having children), and it redefines the gendered division of care and work. This governmental equal opportunities policy opened the door for including lone mothers in the welfare reforms of the 1990s. This was further reinforced by a report by the Scientific Council for Governmental Policy⁵ which challenged the comparatively low labour-participation rates in the Netherlands and suggested integrating the enormous reserve of housewives into the labour market (WRR, 1990).

While the 1996 welfare reform definitively changes the gender assumptions with regard to lone mothers from caring to employed motherhood, it is also ambivalent. At the time the law was implemented, no policies were in force to support lone mothers in their double responsibilities, nor was a conditional right to child care included in the law. After-school care, necessary for mothers with children of school age, is very slowly developing in the Netherlands (only 4 percent of all children of school age are covered) and if it is available it is generally of poor quality. Another point is that, according to the law, municipalities have to take into account mothers' caring responsibilities, but again no clarity is given about what this means. It is not clear how the assumption to help lone mothers out of poverty by them finding a job should be weighed in relation to the assumption of dealing with mothers' care responsibilities. This is even more complicated since the Department of Social Affairs promotes a part-time work strategy for men and women, in particular when they have children. This perspective was prepared by the governmental advisory Committee for Future Scenarios⁶ (1995) and accepted as the governmental equal opportunities strategy. In several ministerial documents such as *Kansen op*

Combineren (opportunities for combining, 1997) and *Naar een nieuw evenwicht tussen zorg en arbeid* (towards a new balance between work and care, 1999), the so-called 'combination scenario' is put forward. This scenario involves a working week of a maximum of 32 hours for both men and women in order to give them both the opportunity of combining work and care, with the assumption that as a couple they will share work and care. With regard to lone mothers, this policy has had an unforeseen effect: the question 'Does what counts for partnered parents also count for lone parents and, if so, who will support lone parents' part-time work?' has remained on the political agenda till today. This governmental combination strategy has led to considerable confusion about the work requirements in the new social assistance law, and is partly why lone mothers and local caseworkers are resistant to full-time employment for lone mothers.

Shortly after the implementation of the welfare reform the Dutch government, in reaction to the first public comments on the law, introduced some additional provisions to support lone mothers' re-entry into the labour market. The new administration (a coalition of social democrats, social liberals and right-wing liberals) became aware of the cultural shock the reform had caused. Protest was heard from all over the country and the media spent considerable time exposing the harsh implications of the law. In early 1996, the government decided to introduce an extra tax reduction (instead of 6 percent, working lone mothers could now deduct 12 percent of their income before they had to pay tax) and an earnings disregard (called premium for part-time work) of Gld 250 a month for lone parents. In addition, Gld 85m a year was made available for child care and can be applied for by the municipalities (*Staatscourant* 43, 1996). These measures show that directly after the welfare reform, the Dutch government felt the need for national incentives to encourage its aims to be put into practice. It has to be said, however, that neither the gov-

ernment, nor local authorities responsible for implementing the law, has a clear idea of the law's impact on lone-parent families. It was striking how soon it was realized that very little was known about the characteristics of lone mothers on welfare, of their attitudes and capacities, their levels of education and ability to enter employment. Insight was also lacking into how the different objectives of the law could be combined: should work be prioritized above child care or poverty reduction, and what must be done if mothers opt for part-time work only? It was at the local authorities' discretion to interpret the law as they saw fit (Knijn and Van Wel, 1999).

Poor support and poor results

Lone mothers in the Netherlands are not at all in agreement with the welfare reform. This is not surprising when one considers the enormous ideological shift from caring to working motherhood in the new welfare regime. It is interesting that not only lone mothers on welfare but also the majority of working lone mothers who have never been on welfare are not in agreement with the welfare reform (see Table 2).

The main counter-argument of lone mothers, whether they are employed or not, is that mothers should be able to decide themselves when the moment is right for them to seek employment. This also explains why employed mothers do not support the law. This does not mean that lone mothers do not want to have paid work. The majority of the employed mothers (84 percent) and many of the lone mothers on welfare (56 percent) confirmed that a combination of caring for children and paid work brings variation to one's life, contributes to self-esteem and self-development, and is important for social contacts and autonomy. However, lone mothers on welfare, unlike employed lone parents, do not expect that paid work will contribute much to their income. They also see more disadvan-

Table 2 Acceptability among lone mothers of the welfare reform's work obligation for lone parents with children above 5 years (%).

<i>Preferred work obligation</i>	<i>Lone mothers on welfare N = 452</i>	<i>Lone parents not on welfare N = 688</i>
No obligation	52	34
20 hours or less	31	37
21–36 hours	4	9
Partly (no details)	5	8
Full obligation	6	8
Unknown	2	3

tages in combining work and care than employed lone parents do. They stress that it should not harm the children and that it is only the mother herself who can decide about when the moment and conditions are right to go to work (Van Wel and Knijn, 2000).

In practice we see that lone mothers on welfare are not very eager to find a job. Although about two-thirds of the lone mothers on welfare say that they want to come off welfare, only some of them are intensively seeking work. Schooling and training are preferred activities. Almost half of the lone mothers on welfare have taken the opportunity, offered by the new welfare law, to follow courses and training programmes that will improve their capacities for work.

Because of the repetitive character of our research, we were able to see how many lone mothers on welfare actually came off social assistance. The results are rather disappointing: not more than 12 percent left welfare last

year. When one bears in mind that lone mothers are on welfare for an average of six years, an average of 16 percent should have been expected, even without additional incentives such as a new law including the work obligation. This implies that under the new law, probably fewer lone mothers left social assistance than ever before. The percentage of lone mothers on welfare who have found a job is also not very encouraging (Table 3). About a quarter of these mothers had a paid job in combination with a benefit; a year later about a third of the lone mothers on welfare combined a paid job with an additional benefit (Van Wel and Knijn, 2000).

The most remarkable conclusion of our research concerns the number of exemptions from the work obligation made by local officials. About 60 percent of all lone mothers on welfare who do not have children younger than five years old are exempted from the full obligation to work (36 percent are fully

Table 3 Current activities of lone mothers on welfare (schooling, work, exemptions from the work obligation)

<i>Activities</i>	<i>Lone mothers on welfare N = 452 (%)</i>	<i>Lone parents not on welfare N = 688 (%)</i>
Economic independence by paid work	12	72
Work and welfare benefit	26	0
Work and additional income	2	16
Welfare benefits only	58	0
Other income sources (e.g. social security, widow pensions)	2	11
Voluntary work	27	21
Education during the last two years	49	60
Exempted from the work obligation	54	—
Partly exempted from the work obligation	18	—

exempted, 25 percent have a part-time work obligation only) (Van Wel and Knijn, 2000). This is astonishing because it means that a majority of the social category that the law is aimed at is in fact excluded from its coverage. The question of course is 'Why?': are local caseworkers and lone mothers deliberately trying to subvert the law or are these mothers simply not capable of becoming employed without additional support?

Obstacles to getting off welfare

Lone mothers on welfare differ in one crucial aspect from lone parents not on welfare: their educational level is much lower. A large majority (almost two-thirds) of the lone mothers on welfare has not completed intermediate vocational training and 37 percent of these mothers did not pass exams in their final education. In contrast, almost 60 percent of the lone parents who earn their own living have higher professional qualifications (social work, journalism, nursing, graphic design etc.) or an academic degree. Elsewhere, we have demonstrated by means of a LISREL analysis that this factor is of major importance – together with health, working history and work ethos – for lone mothers' participation in the labour market (Van Wel and Knijn, 2001). Here we will focus on the role that gendered assumptions held by lone mothers play in coming off welfare and how these assumptions reduce their opportunity to make use of incentives to combine work and care.

Given the idea that 'gendered moral rationalities' (Duncan and Edwards, 1996) may influence lone mothers' efforts in finding work, we studied the motherhood assumptions of both employed lone parents and lone mothers on welfare. A systematic comparison of several subgroups of lone mothers could provide evidence in support of this argument. Being aware of the fact that respondents to a survey tend to answer more 'politically correctly' if the questions are impersonally

formulated, and this is particularly so in the Netherlands (Knijn, 1994; Hakim, 2000), the statements were formulated in a personal way.⁷ Mainly due to the enormous differences in educational level, the care and work ethos of the two groups of lone mothers did indeed differ systematically.⁸ Lone mothers on welfare, mostly with low educational qualifications, have a (statistically tested) significantly higher care ethos (score of 3.9 on a 5-point scale) than lone parents not on welfare, who are mostly highly educated (score of 3.4), but interestingly enough this is not true for the work ethos, which is the same for both groups (2.5 on a 5-point scale). In its turn, the high care ethos of lone mothers on welfare influences other factors that might be crucial in obtaining a job. Lone mothers on welfare whose care ethos dominates their work ethos do not wish to come off welfare, are much less occupied in looking for a job, disapprove more of public child care and foresee more problems in combining work and care (Van Wel and Knijn, 2000). Because of this combination of low education and a high care ethos, lone mothers on welfare have problems in making use of financial and care incentives that are meant to help them out of welfare.

For lone mothers, potential earnings are a crucial factor for finding work. In line with its official combination policy, the Department of Social Affairs and Employment states that lone mothers should be capable of leaving the welfare system if they could work a maximum of 32 hours a week. An earnings disregard and tax reductions are available for this purpose. Working lone parents who do not depend on welfare do indeed work on average 30 hours a week; 43 percent work more than 32 hours a week and only 8 percent work less than 20 hours a week. On the basis of their average income, we have calculated the minimum hours a mother has to work to come off welfare.⁹ These calculations show that women with lower educational qualifications would have to work a minimum of 32 hours, while parents with higher educational

Table 4 Income package of lone parents not on welfare

<i>Educational level</i>	<i>% employed</i>	<i>% receiving alimony</i>	<i>% receiving other than welfare benefits</i>
Low	69	26	35
Middle	89	42	20
High	92	38	15

Table 5 Child care and care package (%)

<i>Sources of care</i>	<i>Lone mothers on welfare (452)</i>	<i>Lone parents not on welfare (lower ed./N: 98)</i>	<i>Lone parents not on welfare (middle ed./N: 197)</i>	<i>Lone parents not on welfare (high ed./N: 393)</i>
Former partner/ co-parent	10	14	20	44
Family, friends	27	31	48	48
Public child care	15	15	20	29
Paid childminder	7	4	12	32
No child care	62		31	
Care package	22	23	37	56

[footnote included earlier]

qualifications can manage on about 24 hours a week (Van Wel and Knijn, 2000). By implication, lone mothers with lower educational qualifications would only be able to improve their income if they worked almost full time. However, their care ethos does not allow them to do so, and they work even less than the mothers with higher educational qualifications. Instead, lone mothers with lower educational qualifications either do not work – and receive unemployment benefits (33 percent) – or work part time (25 percent) and receive benefits. These options, however, do not help to improve their income. Opportunities for lone mothers to find additional income could also contribute to their willingness to find a job. When, for instance, alimony, child allowances or part-time premiums can be added to earnings from part-time work, it would be easier to reduce the working week to the hours preferred. Yet our research shows that mothers with lower educational qualifications not only have the lowest incomes from paid work, but they also receive the least alimony. The middle and more highly educated lone parents have better opportunities to improve their earned income, because they receive more alimony (Table 4). By

implication, lone mothers on welfare seem to be caught in a dilemma. If they want to come off welfare they will have to accept an almost full-time job due to their low hourly wages and the lack of financial support by ex-partners. This is, however, not in accordance with their care ethos and assumptions about motherhood, which say that they should care for their children as much as possible.

Less highly educated lone mothers also make less use of child care despite the fact that specific subsidies for child care are available if municipalities apply for them. The reason behind this incentive is that most lone mothers cannot fulfil the responsibilities for care and work all by themselves. Studies have indeed shown that these new incentives help in stimulating lone mothers to find work, although this seldom results in them coming off welfare (Van den Akker et al., 1998). One problem is that for schoolchildren hardly any after-school care is available, while another is that many lone parents do not regard public child care as a good alternative to their own care. This means that lone parents need other forms of support for child care. When we compare both groups of lone parents, we see a great diversity in their use of child care (Table 5).

This can be partly explained by the fact that lone mothers on welfare require less support; they undertake the care themselves. We therefore differentiated between lone parents with lower, middle and higher educational qualifications not on welfare to see whether they all received the same kind of support. Once again, it was the (working) parents with lower educational qualifications who received the least support. Not only do they make substantially less use of public care provisions, they also, contrary to our expectations, have less support from family and friends. Maybe the most striking conclusion is that their ex-partners barely play a role in caring for the children in contrast to the ex-partners of lone parents with middle and higher educational qualifications (Van Wel and Knijn, 2000).

We have to conclude that the welfare reform seems to suit lone parents with higher educational qualifications in particular. It is not too problematic for them to earn a living by working a maximum of 32 hours a week; their care ethos is less dominant than their work ethos; they have longer working histories and more often they have some freedom in arranging their working hours too. Finally, they are more able to organize considerable care support, mainly by sharing care with their former partners. Ironically, however, the welfare reform is not that significant for these lone parents. They are unlikely to be on welfare and, for the most part, never have been. In contrast, lone parents with lower educational qualifications and on welfare lack the appropriate 'gender attitude' for work to prevail above care, do not appreciate public child care and foresee more problems in combining work and care. In addition, they cannot expect much financial progress from obtaining work and would have to work full time to earn an income which is above the welfare level. Moreover, they lack good care-support either by their former partners or public care provisions. This is why they try to evade and resist the new law, claiming the need for better support as the only condition

for finding employment. How do local case-workers and local policymakers react to this?

Careful or lenient: local discretion ambivalence

A new parliamentary debate in 1999 demonstrated the ambivalence of local authorities in implementing welfare reform for lone mothers. In this debate, under-secretary Verstand presented two options for dealing with lone mothers on welfare in the future. The first option would be to extend the law to all lone mothers no matter how old their children were, although mothers of children younger than five would be obliged to work only part time. The second option would maintain the current age restriction and reduce the work obligation for mothers with children from the ages of 5 to 12 to a maximum of 24 hours a week. Verstand herself emphasizes that based on all the advice she received from social organizations, advisory boards and municipalities, and on the basis of the current practice, the second option was preferable (Ministerie van Sociale Zaken en Werkgelegenheid, 1999). From the 15 organizations (trade unions, employers' organizations, national women's organizations and organizations responsible for social security) who responded, most opposed the work obligation for lone mothers with children below the age of 5. These organizations also supported the option to reduce the work obligation for lone mothers with children below the age of 12 years (some even said 16 years) to a part-time obligation. Among these organizations were the Association of Dutch Municipalities (Vereniging Nederlandse Gemeenten: VNG) and the National Organization of Heads of Social Services (Directeuren van Sociale Diensten: DIVOSA) who together represented all levels of the administration of the welfare reform all over the country (Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, 1999). Their advice confirms

the current implementation of the welfare reform and is understandable in view of the ambivalence demonstrated by the local policy-makers and caseworkers we interviewed (Knijn and Van Wel, 1999).¹⁰ The majority of local policymakers and caseworkers regard the welfare reform as a challenge to stimulate lone mothers to join the labour market. All five municipalities in our study had applied for subsidies to extend local child-care provisions and they had interviewed all lone mothers on welfare. They also made use of the additional premiums for part-time work, and have developed new training programmes and work processes. Nevertheless, almost none of our interviewees were optimistic about the opportunities for getting a majority of the lone mothers out of the welfare system. All anticipated labour market problems, in particular for the mothers with lower educational qualifications. A major argument is that the female part of the lowest segment of the labour market is developing into a part-time market, among others, in (health) care, shops and other services. The wages earned in these sorts of jobs are too low to provide an income that is high enough to relinquish social assistance when only working part time. The caseworkers say that employers are not particularly eager to offer mothers of young children full-time jobs, especially if it costs more because of child-care payments. Other external barriers mentioned by local policy-makers and even more by the caseworkers, are associated with the administrative and bureaucratic complexities of the governmental incentives; a reason for not making use of them especially if they offer no perspective of getting a mother off welfare. One example may illustrate this. The well trained caseworkers (all have higher professional education) are well-aware that it is at their discretion to encourage lone mothers to get a part-time job; the law even supports this in cases where the mother has schoolchildren. However, offering mothers part-time jobs is not favoured by caseworkers. They say that this means a lot of extra work for them, for example, in applying

for earnings disregard and finding child care. When they consider these extra administrative investments in conjunction with the fact that a part-time job will not enable lone mothers to leave the welfare system, many caseworkers opt for the easiest option and keep the lone mothers on the welfare records. This is even more so since they know that the poverty gap will widen between a part-time job plus earnings disregard, child-care benefits and additional social assistance on the one hand and an income from paid work without all these extras on the other. In such cases, they say, there is simply no stimulus for lone mothers to ever look for a full-time job (Knijn and Van Wel, 1999).

In addition, many municipalities admit that they are not prepared to support lone mothers in finding work. The discretion to implement working policies for lone mothers is a completely new task for them to fulfil. For decades they were only required to take care of payments for these mothers who had not even the right to education beyond the lowest levels. Now they have been granted the discretion to implement welfare reform, they can barely handle it. With some exceptions, communication concerning the local objectives of this law had been unclear for the caseworkers, as some were not even aware of what processes the employment offices had developed and also lacked insight into the lone mothers' working capacities. Most municipalities had not developed a specific policy to treat lone mothers differently from other welfare claimants and they felt rather insecure about how far they could go in enforcing lone mothers to find work against their will. Time after time, we heard the following: 'We prefer stimulation to enforcement', which implies that only those lone mothers who are very keen to relinquish social assistance will be supported.

Together these factors explain why so many lone mothers are exempt from the obligation to work full time. When their caseworker has to fill in the 'categorization form', including four categories ranging from 'immediately suited to find work' to 'not available for the

labour market', this is a decisive moment. It is not only the mother's own working capacities which count, but also her family life, the children's well-being, potential problems of the children, her own health and that of the children which are relevant. Once it has been decided that the claimant belongs to the fourth category, no further action is taken until the next interview that will not take place (in most municipalities) for another 18 months. Paradoxically this also means that lone mothers who want to come off welfare are not offered much assistance; about a third of the lone mothers in our research who wanted to find work stated that they had not seen a caseworker in the last year (Van Wel and Knijn, 2000).

Our conclusion is that the local discretionary powers function as a real gatekeeper (Lipsky, 1979) for lone mothers who cannot or will not find a paid job. In this respect they really perform a caring job, protecting lone mothers on welfare against a welfare reform that they as well as the lone mothers experience as a harsh one. The other side of the coin, however, is that this strategy keeps many lone mothers on the poverty level and does not help them to find good work processes or additional support. In this sense, the local authority is acting rather leniently and is neglecting the double obligation of lone mothers on welfare. This ambivalence reflects the assumptions about motherhood held by local policymakers and caseworkers. To a certain degree, they accept the shift from caring to employed motherhood and agree that lone mothers who are capable of earning their own living should do so. They have also developed several kinds of support to help these mothers. But they are also hesitant about enforcing lone mothers to find employment, partly because of the lack of good prospects for these mothers if they come off welfare, but also because they do not believe that earning an income should dominate over good care of the children. In this respect, they identify with the mothers' gender assumptions, and the mothers' own contentions that

only they can take good care of the children. In such cases, local caseworkers try to persuade mothers to look for alternatives, but sanctions are not taken against them if they insist on caring for their children themselves (Van Wel and Knijn, 2000).

Conclusion

Welfare reforms concerning lone mothers in the Netherlands have proven not to be very successful. Four years after the implementation of the new social assistance law (*nABW*), only slightly more than one out of ten lone mothers have left the welfare system and new parliamentary debates about the future of the system are in preparation. In the autumn of 2000, the Minister of Social Affairs (Vermeend) presented a new strategy to encourage lone mothers to leave the welfare system. The government refuses to accept the poor results of the 1996 welfare reform for lone mothers, mainly because of the severe labour market shortage, in particular in the field of education and care (health care as well as home care). The argument is that it is unacceptable for so many mothers to live on social assistance benefits while so many jobs in the feminized part of the labour market are unfilled. Parliament is ready to accept this argument on the condition that the new strategy safeguards the interests of lone mothers and their children. The main elements of the new proposal therefore include additional subsidies for child care and schooling as well as extra tax reductions. In contrast to the government's 1999 proposal, lone mothers of children up to the age of 5 will not receive an 'active' work obligation, although municipalities are encouraged to also offer work and schooling processes that have to be accepted by the lone mothers. Part of the new strategy is that the government reached an agreement with the organization representing Dutch municipalities. On the basis of several studies, it has been concluded that the local authorities

have not invested enough in realizing the aims of the welfare reform. From now on, municipalities will have to report annually on what efforts they have made to stimulate lone mothers' labour market participation and what the results are (Letter from the Minister of Social Affairs to Parliament, 29 September, 2000). Yet it may be clear that the outcome of these new initiatives cannot be predicted. The poor results of the welfare reform are partly due to disagreements about gendered moralities, and, in particular, about the meaning of motherhood. The national social policy assumes that mothers as well as fathers should combine work and care responsibilities. This assumption is also applicable for lone mothers although it is acknowledged that sharing work and care will be more problematic for them. To improve their opportunities for combining work and care, financial incentives to earn their own living by working part time (= 32 hours a week) as well as specific child-care subsidies have been provided. In general, lone parents with higher educational qualifications agree with the assumptions of the reform and, due to their higher incomes, they have the opportunity of arranging income as well as their care package, and they do not therefore have problems in meeting these assumptions. This is why they are seldom on welfare and a majority of them never has been. In contrast, lone parents with lower educational qualifications do not agree with the gender assumption of putting the work ethos above the care ethos, and due to their lower income and lack of opportunities to arrange the income and care package, they are unable to meet the governments' criteria. Most of these lone parents are therefore on welfare and will remain so. Local policymakers and caseworkers who have been granted discretionary powers to implement the welfare reform have in practice demonstrated ambivalence. In general, they agree with the national objectives but they also resist too rigid an interpretation of the reform; moreover they reject the full-time work obligation for lone mothers who have a

strong care ethos. They are also hesitant to enforce lone mothers into jobs which may not improve their income, not least because this demands a lot of additional work for the local caseworkers themselves. They are indeed careful as well as lenient gatekeepers.

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Notes

- 1 Income packages consist of a combination of several financial resources, for instance income from work in combination with benefits or alimony.
- 2 The first study is based upon a representative sample of lone mothers on welfare and includes 1% of the whole population of welfare mothers randomly selected in five cities in the Netherlands. The second study is based upon a randomly selected sample of lone parents not on welfare in one middle-sized town in the Netherlands.
- 3 Both studies are financially supported by the Dutch Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment (Ministerie van Sociale Zaken en Werkgelegenheid) and by the Ministry of Public Health, Welfare and Sport (Ministerie van Volksgezondheid, Welzijn en Sport). The first research of 1,063 lone mothers on welfare was conducted in 1998, the second research of 452 of these mothers and 688 lone parents not on welfare was conducted in 1999.
- 4 The Council for Equal Opportunities (*Emancipatie Raad*) is a government advisory board concerned with gender issues. It was founded as an independent organization to advise the government about equal opportunities policy in 1981. In 1997 several ad hoc advisory committees replaced this council.
- 5 The Scientific Council for Governmental Policy (*Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbeleid*, WRR) is an independent advisory board

- for governmental policy running its own research department. It mainly advises on long-term social processes regarding social security, employment and demography.
- 6 This Committee for Future Scenarios (*Commissie Toekomstscenario's Herverdeling Onbetaalde Arbeid*) is one of the ad hoc independent advisory committees that the Ministry of Social Affairs set up to outline future care and work policy.
 - 7 For instance, we did not ask the more general question 'child care is not a good option for young children', but phrased the question as follows: 'The most important thing in life is providing a pleasant home for one's children.'
 - 8 Both the work ethos and the care ethos are measured by four items. The work ethos consists of the questions: 1) a paid job is a source of happiness, 2) a paid job is crucial, 3) a job; that is what I prefer above everything else, 4) I want to do everything to get a paid job. The care ethos consists of the questions: 1) the best thing in life is to take care of one's children, 2) a happy life for your children is crucial, 3) the most important thing in life is providing a pleasant home for one's children, 4) one lives for one's children. The relationship between the two ethoses is calculated by the difference between the means of the two scales.
 - 9 It would mean that she would have to earn about Gld 400 more than the welfare benefit to compensate for housing subsidies, municipal tax reductions and additional benefits.
 - 10 Group interviews were held with caseworkers and local policymakers in five Dutch cities: Amersfoort, Apeldoorn, The Hague, Utrecht and Zaanstad. Fifty caseworkers and local policymakers participated in these interviews.
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